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## **ILLINOIS TOWN'S DREAMS LOCKED UP IN PRISON FOLKS IN TAMMS SAY THE "SUPERMAX" HASN'T DONE ANYTHING SUPER FOR THEM.**

*Raad Cawthon. Philadelphia Inquirer. Philadelphia, Pa.: Oct 16, 1999. pg. A.1*

**Full Text** (1071 words)

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### TAMMS ILLINOIS PRISON ECONOMY EMPLOYMENT

Pang, like the rest of Tamms, was convinced that the prison would be the catalyst to jump-start the economically depressed little town, which had an unemployment rate of 21 percent. Designed to house Illinois' "worst of the worst" - inmates who had committed additional crimes while behind bars - the supermaximum-security facility would provide jobs for 400 people, the state said.

"When you're dying, you grab for whatever rope you can find," Pang, 76, says of his rabid pursuit of the prison. And when Tamms won, "most people here thought things were going to change overnight. I did, too."

Things didn't. In fact, six years later, they have hardly changed at all.

The \$73 million Tamms Correction Center - the Supermax and an adjacent minimum-security prison - now sits on the town's northern edge. And, yes, almost 400 people work there. But only a handful are Tamms residents. Most are experienced personnel brought in from other state prisons - and most have chosen to settle in or near the larger, more prosperous town of Anna, 20 miles north, not in down-at-the-heels Tamms.

What's more, since the prison opened in early 1998, the village has had to raise taxes to help offset the \$450,000 bond it floated to pay for related infrastructure improvements - an entrance road, a 50,000-gallon water tank, gas and water lines. Tamms still owes \$125,000.

Pang says he does not have current unemployment figures but is "quite confident" the town no longer suffers 21 percent unemployment - although surrounding Alexander County still reports almost a quarter of its population below the poverty level and unemployment near 18 percent.

Pang and other village leaders counsel patience. "I figure the prison is going to be here another 25 years," the mayor says. "We made a big jump . . . the saying is that you have to give before you can take."

But for many in Tamms - where the last train on the Chicago and East Illinois Railroad passed through almost 25 years ago - patience has run out.

"We would have been better off if they had built it in Anna or somewhere else," says Marilyn Martin, owner of a local florist shop. "We got the prison's expenses. We got the overhead. But other communities got the jobs. It's kind of sick."

Martin, like most others here, says she thought winning the Supermax might change the fortunes of a region the rest of the state traditionally ignores. Known as Little Egypt (Cairo, Thebes and Karnak are all within 25 miles of Tamms), it sits at the southernmost tip of the state, where the Ohio River joins the Mississippi 350 miles south of Chicago.

"The State of Illinois used to stop at Springfield, and then they moved it down to Carbondale," she says, relating the sardonic local view of geography. "After that you were supposed to be able to go right into Kentucky or Missouri - but you still have 60 miles of Illinois left."

Now, Martin says, housing prices in Tamms are dropping. She contends that real estate agents up in Anna - where there are evident benefits from the prison, from increased housing starts to new fast-food franchises - are intentionally steering potential residents away from Tamms.

"They tell them there is nothing to look at this far south," she says.

The Supermax, surrounded by a labyrinth of fences topped with concertina wire, sits north of Tamms' business district

in a former soybean field that the village bought, annexed, and gave to the state. Every 15 minutes a guard van circles the perimeter; inside, each inmate spends 23 hours a day alone in a steel-doored 8-by-10-foot cell with a concrete platform and thin mattress for a bed. No visitors are allowed. The last time most people in Tamms saw the inside was when the state held an open house before prisoners moved in in February 1998.

As grim and imposing as the Supermax is (a Chicago attorney has sued the state, contending that the very act of incarcerating someone in it constitutes cruel and unusual punishment), it intrudes surprisingly little on leafy, Mayberry-like Tamms. In fact, a visitor can drive through town and miss it altogether. That here-but-not-here perception is yet another cause of local unhappiness.

Because it sits on a road off the highway to the north, "they don't even have to come through this town," says Debra Franklin. "The road is way out there. . . . They have nothing to do with the town at all."

Franklin owns the Burger Shack 2, home to the Super Max Burger - the taste of which, she promises, "will imprison you."

She opened her restaurant five years ago, about the time the prison was going up and business boomed. But when the building was complete and the construction crews left, so did her customer base.

"I used to have three or four girls back here running around trying to get the orders out," she says, standing in a kitchen where one other person is now employed. "Now I can sit for hours. . . . I wish they would build something else."

Martin, the local florist, blames Mayor Pang for giving the state everything it wanted to get the prison, without ensuring reciprocity. "They worked him like a dose of salts," she says.

In 1993, when the drive to be declared the site was in full swing, Pang was reelected by 176 votes, a veritable landslide; in 1997, a few months before the finished prison opened, his margin of victory was seven votes.

"There have not been a lot of changes," he acknowledges, sitting in the restored train depot that serves as the village hall. "When we bid on it, we didn't realize what it would be. We didn't realize that a lot of the guards would be transferred in. We thought we would see more progress immediately."

Pang has talked with the mayors of other towns where prisons have located, asking how long Tamms will have to wait before it sees a return on its investment. The answer he gets, he says, is five to 10 years.

But Tamms and its shrinking, aging population may not have another decade to wait.

"It's never done a thing for us," Martin says of the Supermax. "We believed anything was better than nothing. We were wrong."

Credit: Raad Cawthon, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

#### [Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO

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